

The Rabbit and the Coyote

Arts curriculum from 1969 rebounding in schools

BY ROBIN LITHGOW • PHOTOS COURTESY OF TIM RUDNICK

In 1998 I was hired as the Theatre Adviser for LAUSD. Colleagues in elementary dance and visual arts joined me to design a plan add to the existing music program and restore the arts to the core of the curriculum for every child in every one of the more than 450 plus elementary schools in our district. It was (and still is) a gargantuan challenge.

Restore!? Let me explain. My husband still has an old violin that his father acquired when he was in elementary school in Boyle Heights, in the early 1920s. He was a recent immigrant from Eastern Europe, struggling with poverty, but he had regular music instruction in school and he learned to play the violin. EVERY child had that opportunity back then! Up until the early 80s, every school in Los Angeles had full-time music and arts teachers. When I began teaching in East Los Angeles in 1969, my students had music and visual arts classes every week. Up until the early 70s, that was just the way it was done — not just in Los Angeles, but all across the state.

What was innovative about the Elementary Arts Program plan we initiated twenty years ago is that it added dance and theatre to the mix. The Arts Education Partnership in Washington D.C. had just published “Champions for Change: the Impact of the Arts on Learning,” which showed strong links between theatre and dance and achievement in literacy and numeracy, with the evidence being strongest in communities of poverty; so their value in the curriculum was elevated.

For the first decade we were able to grow every year and add teachers in all four arts disciplines, and we were on a trajectory to fulfill our ultimate goal: access to all disciplines for every child at every grade level. Our teachers were tasked with building standards-based, discipline-specific instruction for a limited number of classes, training classroom teachers to integrate the arts into their curriculum, and generating enthusiasm for additional instruc-

Top right: Rabbits in the garden

Bottom right: Chloe and Fen are Rabbit and Coyote



tion offered by the Music Center, the Opera, Los Angeles art museums, and dozens of community-based arts education programs.

But then the crash came. In 2009 we took a terrible hit, but the board kept us on life support. I retired as the head of the Arts Education Branch in 2012, but Steven McCarthy, the current Director, tells me that they are well on the road to recovery, once again adding teachers every year, always staying true to our original goals.

This past October, I visited Westminster School and watched a 3rd grade drama class led by theatre teacher Afsaneh Boutorabi. The children pictured here created characters and improvised scenes from a Mexican trickster tale, “The Rabbit and the Coyote.” When I asked their teacher, Ms. Altman, about the program, I got the biggest smile of the day. “It’s fantastic!” she told me. “The children learn so much!” Then she told me what I’ve



heard so many times from teachers over the years. In addition to learning self-confidence, expression, and discipline, the children learn to identify story elements like character, setting, plot, suspense, and detail. “We use these strategies every time we read a story,” Ms. Altman added.

Westminster’s principal, Barry Cohen, added, “The arts build community. The more arts there are in our community the more our children will flourish socially, emotionally, and culturally, and the deeper and richer their learning will be.”

For me personally, there is an especially gratifying payoff! Who could have predicted back then that both my granddaughter and my great niece would this year be new kindergarteners in LAUSD schools — Westminster and Eagle Rock — where they will receive theatre classes from teachers I hired twenty years ago!

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